direction
a journal on the Alexander Technique
volume 3 number 10

Musicians 2.0

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Surfmore Pty Ltd

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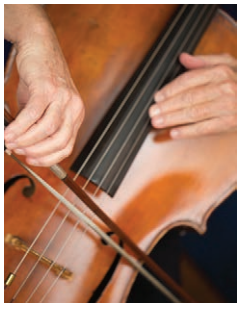
Front cover



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Acknowledgments

Thankyou Gaby for doing all of the legwork for this issue…not to mention keeping the whip handy to keep the horses moving. My apologies that we over stepped our word budget and couldn't print Bob Lada's work this time. This is the first issue in many that the editor could be just that and not also create every word of content. Thankyou Lorna, Jeremy, Brooke, Ina, Lori and Stephen for doing your best to help us with classy images and for all of the musicians who have generously provided their testimony and passion for us to share. We also appreciate the eyes and minds of Michael Frederick, Judy Stern.

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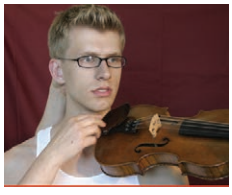


Learning, teaching, music-making and the Alexander Technique

Gabriella Minnes Brandes

I have been enchanted by and intrigued with performance for many years. What is required of performers to be able to connect with the audience, be focused and open at the same time, bring together hours of practice to a culminating moment of inspiration that moves the audience?

Over the last 30 years I have been teaching and researching the Alexander Technique. I also hold a PhD in education, where I have studied how we learn, how we teach, how we learn to teach and how teachers, students and researchers can work together, collaborating and learning from one another.

I have often wondered what educational theories and practices can offer Alexander teachers, and how teaching Alexander Technique informs my work as an educator and researcher.

Current learning theories explore how we learn in terms of a process of co-construction of knowledge. Learning is described as an activity of making links between what we already know and what we are learning. Learning is seen as an active and creative process that involves asking questions and seeking answers. Most educational theories explore the cognitive and sometimes the emotional aspects of the learner and rarely go beyond that. John Dewey, an educator, philosopher and one of Alexander's students drew our attention to the importance of learning through experimenting and seeing students holistically. But even Dewey who described the process of learning did not explore what teachers need to do in order to teach. However, F. M. Alexander brought forward a unique addition to the discussion of pedagogy. Alexander sees both teacher and student as co-constructors of embodied knowledge, exploring their own use and function as the key component of learning and teaching. Teachers must work on themselves as they teach, argues Alexander. In order to have students learn, teachers need to work on themselves and use their hands, so that students experience new ways of moving, that are out of their habit.

Musicians spend endless hours practicing, analyzing music, working with muscle memory, intention and communication. Alexander teachers are skilled at managing their own psycho-physical coordination while assisting students to attend to their own coordination, and with a unique hands-on process bring about self realization unavailable via traditional teaching methods. As a result, Alexander teachers are instrumental in supporting musicians who seek efficiency of use to allow for communication through sound.

We offer these articles hoping that they enrich your repertoire of ideas of application of Alexander principles and making music, and invite you to seek further connections between creativity and Alexander Technique.

Editorial

by Paul Cook

Without music our lives would be bereft of emotion. The drive for the human to create music is all too often impeded by his inability to sustainably use himself—and impede himself he does unfortunately to great affect. And what of the musician wanting to continually refine and improve their performance?

Within this spirited issue we provide inspiration for the injured, principles for self-study and method for all teachers. Please enjoy and share these thoughtful articles and multiply our mission to bring Alexander to a wider audience in the world.

September 15th, 2016

THE SCIENCE REPORT:

If Music Be The Food of Thought

There is the story of a famous music conductor arriving at the pearly gates of heaven, pushing to the front of the queue and insisting that St. Peter take him to God immediately. "What could possibly be so urgent?" inquires St. Peter. "All my life I have wanted to know one thing: why are minor keys sad?" replies the conductor.

At the Alexander Congress in Limerick we heard performances of Irish laments, which evoked in us the aching sense of regret, loss and sadness, yet the performances did not leave us depressed or suicidal, instead they left us deeply moved and uplifted. Why? One likely reason is that our immediate social and physical environment was not negative—we were at an exciting Congress, in a lovely place, with friends and uplifting circumstances. Even when Irish laments evoked sadness, we found them to be pleasurable, even cathartic.

Similarly, if we compare our response to Kylie Minogue's, "I should be so lucky" and Purcell's *Plaint*, "Let me weep" from the Faerie Queen, we might find that Kylie's song makes us tap our foot, sing along, or even get up and dance. *The Plaint* by contrast, gives us shivers down the spine and goosebumps, inducing in us an intense, alert stillness. Possessing eclectic musical tastes we might enjoy hearing both pieces, but in isolation we respond physically and emotionally in entirely different ways to the two pieces. Why? Perhaps the haunting beauty of Purcell comes closer to our own expression of self and feeling of social connectedness and has more existential meaning for us than Kylie's happy, bouncy song, which just makes us smile.

The responses we have to music depend greatly on context, culture, era, age, and our own memories. Cultural learning is particularly important. The Tsimane people, who live on a remote tributary of the Amazon can detect no difference between consonant and dissonant sounds, so their emotional response to an Irish lament will necessarily be very different to ours. Even the history of Western music has seen huge shifts in our perceptions—for example, once there were no black notes on keyboards and even church authorities described the tritone (a chord of three whole tones) as *diabolus in musica* ("the Devil in music") and banned it.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have devoted many years of research in an effort to understand the powerful changes in mood, physiology and behaviour that music can evoke, not least because of its therapeutic potential. Because our personal experience is so crucial to our response to music, it is unsurprising to discover that brain circuit structures associated with episodic memory, like the hippocampus and parahippocampal gyrus, are active while we listen to music. Functional brain imaging also reveals that the usual suspects, like the anterior cingulate cortex and the insular cortex increase their activity during emotional experiences, but this is not to say they actually cause these emotions. Indeed, science is a long way from explaining how the changes in air pressure arriving at our ears, which we interpret as "music", exerts such a multitude of effects on us. Nonetheless, when we reflect on the overall importance of music in our lives, we might agree with the poet Joseph Addison,

"Music, the greatest good that mortals know
And all of heaven we have below."

Kevan A.C. Martin is a Director of the Institute of Neuroinformatics, a joint Institute of the University of Zurich and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

Alexander Technique Meets Music

by Ann Shoebridge

Musicians want to play or sing music well. Audiences and musicians are most satisfied when a musician communicates a musical idea, story or emotion very clearly.

The Alexander Technique, with its capacity to refine artistic and technical expression is well suited to this purpose. It is also ideally placed as a means to counter one of the major obstacles to musicians' ongoing ability to play: physical symptoms occurring—and usually recurring—as a result of playing the instrument. The Alexander Technique engages simultaneously with musicians' performance aspirations and their health interests.

The Alexander Technique is intrinsically performing-arts based. FM Alexander himself realised unexpected improvements in his acting as he learned to intercept adverse habits, altering the degree, the order and the manner in which he recruited his muscles to overcome a performance-related voice problem. Key to these improvements was discovering that his inward intention, his physical organisation and the quality of his expression all worked together. Alexander was a nineteenth century pioneer of concepts more recently discussed in neuroscience: that we react unconsciously and act consciously, that the mind and body are indivisible and that constructive change is achieved by pursuing a clear intention.[1, 2] The question is, how is this relevant to musicians?

Performance Quality

Singing or playing music involves intricate mastery of the physical movements involved in producing notes and the responsiveness to communicate every nuanced musical idea, often while supporting an awkward or heavy instrument. Sophisticated psychophysical coordination, a high degree of focus and considerable stamina are needed. Musicians who use principles of the Alexander Technique to engage an appropriate degree and distribution of effort to sing or play often experience greater clarity, ease and enjoyment in performance. When the body and mind are working well together, physical balance with the instrument can be experienced and the musical intention can emerge more clearly.[3, 4]

Musicians using Alexander Technique in performance training describe becoming aware of habits that hamper performance and learning to work in a way that averts them.[5] In their book *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*, teacher-musicians Kleinman and Buckoke quote music students studying Alexander Technique at London's Royal College of Music:[4]

> I got used to my faulty habits and they soon became normal and 'right' to me. I based my entire kinaesthetic sense on this faulty instrument. I was, therefore, processing information through a faulty filter…
> Phoebe Haines, singer

> …I had been concentrating on the release of tension in my shoulder during playing. This had never worked because as soon as my attention was directed elsewhere… the tension returned. However, when I considered the use of my body as a whole and concentrated on the basic Alexander principles… the unnecessary tension was removed and replaced by an efficient use of the body as a whole.
> Kate Robinson, violinist

> … we had our Rachmaninov/Prokofiev concert. I greatly enjoyed myself… I was able to be really in the present whilst performing and wasn't bothered by any of the usual internal dialogues…
> Brigid Coleridge, violinist

Playing-related Musculoskeletal Problems

When I began presenting Alexander Technique performance workshops for senior school music students over a decade ago, around two-thirds of students mentioned that they experienced some kind of physical problem from playing. As I began to work regularly with university and professional musicians I found that overall health and wellbeing deteriorated rather than improved with musical experience. Informal surveys of attendees at performance workshops for professional musicians revealed that up to 90% had a history of playing-related symptoms. Recent research has confirmed these informal observations, reporting 56% of

school age musicians[6], 76% of university music students[7] and 84% of professional orchestral musicians[8] experienced playing-related musculoskeletal problems across their playing lifetime, with about 50% reporting symptoms over the month prior to data collection.

Thirty-five years of research into musicians' health has so far failed to deliver consistent results in successfully reducing the prevalence of musicians' injuries. The majority of research studies have been carried out within a mainstream health framework, suggesting that a broader view may need to be taken to successfully address the high rates of playing-related injury.

Musicians' Health: History

Two centuries ago, well before playing-related problems had been acknowledged, pianist and composer Robert Schumann struggled unsuccessfully to overcome paralysis in the second and third fingers of his right hand that plagued his playing.[9] Debate continues over what caused the paralysis, but its onset coincides with the time he began to train as a virtuoso pianist. His recovery strategies, which included the use of a finger-strengthening device, were unsuccessful and his condition deteriorated.

It was perhaps not until eminent pianists Gary Graffman and Leon Fleischer made public in a 1980 *New York Times* article the debilitating hand problems for which they had been unable to find medical recognition, let alone any kind of effective treatment, that the problem began to receive widespread recognition.[10] Their revelation exposed the problem of physical symptoms directly caused by playing musical instruments that had until then been almost entirely invisible and still remains somewhat opaque. Playing-related symptoms often interfere with the ability to play and cause an unknown number of musicians to cease playing completely.

> "Musicians still operate within a culture of silence and shame with regard to injury"

Graffman and Fleisher's article marked the beginning of concerted research into the plight of musicians and the emergence of performing arts medicine as a recognised discipline. Hundreds of studies have now been completed, many conferences held, specialist musicians' health clinics set up, and national performing arts medicine organisations and a dedicated scientific journal, *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, established.

Musicians' Health Now

Most studies in musicians' health have been descriptive, identifying the type of symptoms and the anatomical distribution of playing-related problems. The most common symptom is pain due to strain on musculotendinous structures.[11] Other symptoms include numbness, tingling, dystonia (coordination difficulties accompanied by sensorimotor malfunction[12]), hearing difficulties caused by prolonged noise exposure, work-related stress, depression and performance anxiety.[13]

Symptoms arising from musculotendinous strain or sensorimotor changes are collectively known as playing-related musculoskeletal problems or disorders (PRMP or PRMD). PRMP are most often experienced in the neck, shoulders, back, upper limbs, and, in the case of wind players, around the mouth, soft palate and jaw.[8, 13-16] The symptom distribution is identical to the distribution of excessive playing-related tension in the musicians with whom I have worked over the past fourteen years.

Risk Factors for Playing-related Problems

Despite the body of knowledge about PRMP, research into underlying risk factors remains scanty. More investigation is needed to adequately understand the processes and factors that cause PRMP.[17] However, potentially modifiable risk factors identified by over 75% of orchestral musicians as contributing to PRMP include excessive playing-related muscle tension, fatigue, long practice sessions, stress, and poor posture.[8] Modifiable risk factors statistically associated with PRMP (although the direction of cause and effect is not yet established) include excessive playing-related muscle tension, stress, neck and back strain from supporting the instrument while playing, the physical challenge of lifting and carrying heavy instruments, and inadequate rest breaks, while regular exercise may be protective against PRMP.[7, 18, 19] A sudden increase in playing time may be causative of PRMP. [20] Clinical and anecdotal evidence suggest that reducing these risk factors has the potential to protect musicians from injury and to aid recovery from playing-related injury, though formal research on this is yet to be published.

A Culture of Avoidance

Despite efforts to introduce healthy playing practices into music curricula and orchestral work environments[21-24], injury figures for musicians remain high.[25] Musicians still operate within a culture of silence and shame with regard to injury, afraid that they will be looked down upon as unable to compete, or that they will be passed over for work in favour of someone stronger or healthier.[26-28] Growing recognition of the scale and urgency of the problem of PRMP is reflected in the active support and endorsement of music institutions participating in recent studies.[24, 29-34] Nevertheless, the vulnerability, fear and frustration experienced by injured musicians in this fragile and competitive environment shows that we are yet to implement reliable prevention and intervention measures that answer the complexities of PRMP.

A notable exception to the resistance of PRMP to intervention is one study that decreased the frequency of playing-related injuries in conservatoire students by 78% with a 12-month program comprising injury prevention education, warm-up exercises and postural hygiene that included individual instruction.[35] The success of this compulsory contact program contrasted with poor uptake of an optional online health module with parallel subject content at another elite music training institution.[36]

> "Integration of wellbeing into the music curriculum and personalised instruction are critical factors"

These two studies investigating the effects of health education on PRMP may hold some clues about effective health education for musicians. The program successful in reducing PRMP was compulsory, integrated into the year's curriculum, designed by a music faculty member with dual qualifications in music and health, and involved personalised instruction. In contrast, the online module with low uptake was optional, had to be pursued in the musician's own time, was designed by health care professionals external to the faculty and did not involve direct contact or personalised instruction. Even taking today's economic imperatives into account, it is possible that integration of wellbeing into the music curriculum and personalised instruction are critical factors in the success of a performance health program.

Lopez[35] found that students' body awareness was low at the start of his 12-month intervention program and high at the end of it. He attributed improvement in performance quality to this improved awareness. Alexander Technique teachers are familiar with the neurological phenomenon of habituation, which means that the firing rates of nerve impulses communicating information within the body decrease as movement becomes habitual. Whatever you are accustomed to becomes your "normal" and any change to that can feel "wrong". Without a practical alternative plan, returning to "normal" and feeling "right" is the default, even if that default is damaging to the point of causing symptoms. Alexander Technique principles provide a means for change

that hurdles the barrier of unreliable feelings, improving kinaesthetic awareness in the process.

Posture

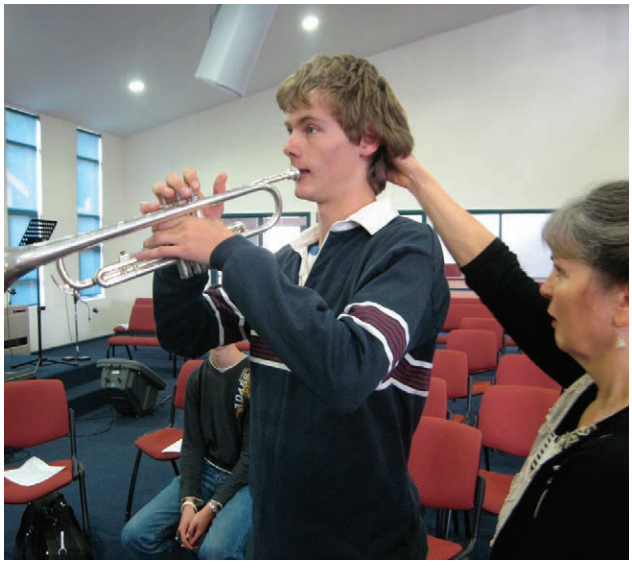
Posture(a concept Alexander rejected due to its narrow terms of reference) has been linked to both music performance quality and PRMP.[37, 38] Studies on posture in musicians have usually concentrated on biomechanical loading as a result of elevated or sustained positions, with minimal attention paid to internal conditions regulated by muscle tension levels, coordination patterns, or qualities of movement that affect performance.

> "Integrating the mind and body emerged as the main process behind optimal posture"

A recent study developed an interdisciplinary theory of optimal posture for musicians using interviews with physiotherapy lecturers, heads of university music departments and Alexander Technique teacher trainers. Findings from the analysis resolved into a theory that emphasised function and movement quality as the foundations of optimal posture.[39] Integrating the mind and body emerged as the main process behind optimal posture, encompassing several interrelated subprocesses. The subprocesses included overcoming habit, maintaining ease, being in dynamic balance, expanding mental and physical frameworks and confronting barriers to change. These processes are all intrinsic to Alexander Technique though "posture" is the word used in blanket form to describe the area of study.

Broadening the Perspective: Workplace Health

Musicians' health is affected by workplace and social influences as well as physical and emotional factors.[40, 41] For Alexander Technique teachers working in music organisations or for musicians concerned with workplace health, it is useful to be aware that organisational culture and management support have been shown to influence workplace health and productivity more than any single intervention and that health care programs driven by the agenda of any one discipline are unlikely to achieve success.[42, 43] Successful health programs align all stakeholders' objectives through collaboration and actively support behaviour change.[44, 45] Alexander Technique teachers have a particular, highly practical skill and it is most effectively used in concert with performers, music teachers, music administrations and health practitioners, all of whom contribute a perspective integral to the musicians' wellbeing.



How Does Alexander Technique Work?

The Alexander Technique stands apart from other mind/body disciplines in formalising as a learned skill an expansive organisation of the head, neck and back that stimulates postural support reflexes, distributes effort efficiently, facilitates breathing and provides dynamic support for freedom and power in the limbs. In the process it improves posture and reduces biomechanical loading on anatomical structures that over time probably underlies playing-related symptoms.[46, 47] This head-neck-back organisation, called primary control, potentially activates coordination of the whole artist. Even very experienced and skilled musicians can perform better when they coordinate themselves using primary control.[3, 48, 49]

The mainstream approach to biomechanical aspects of playing is to analyse and correct from outside the musician, often through postural training, changing playing technique, strengthening and stretching exercises. There is merit in this. The skilled observer can see large-scale misuse in terms of body alignment and excess effort and suggest strategies to improve it. However, coordination and expression are generated from the inside, as feeling, thought and movement weave intricate changes throughout the whole person. Actively engaging the primary control accesses coordination from the inside out, integrating and expressing not only the musician's physicality but also the subtleties generated by the artistic impulse. Coordinating the primary control effectively redistributes effort, unloading overworked structures and stimulating underworked structures into action.[5] The Alexander Technique is a particularly safe technique even when there is a lot of pain present. This is

because of the gentle, non-invasive manual guidance of the Alexander Technique teacher and the fact that the locus of control always remains with the client/pupil.

The Role of Alexander Technique

The principles of Alexander Technique can be applied to any form of human endeavour to challenge adverse habits, improve function and spur creative development. Some Alexander Technique teachers may teach the Technique in the context of simple everyday functional activities like sitting, standing and lying down with the expectation that the learner will extend the learned principles to other activities, while other teachers specialise in applying the Alexander Technique to specific fields including music, drama, dance, running, swimming, pain management, or the practice of dentistry or surgery.

While a teacher's familiarity with the skills required to sing or play an instrument is useful, what is essential is that Alexander Technique teachers are expert in facilitating the use of primary control and the musician is expert at the instrument. By remaining curious as to what is required of the musician to play and using the principles of the Technique to respond, the Alexander Technique teacher and the musician can experiment together with how to apply inhibition, direction, primary control, faulty sensory perception and appropriate effort to playing in the way that works best for the musician.

The role of Alexander Technique in preventing PRMP and reducing or assisting recovery from PRMP is yet to be established in terms of published research. However, in dealing purposefully with adverse habits, redistributing effort more efficiently and improving kinaesthetic awareness, Alexander Technique confronts a number of the risk factors thought to contribute to PRMP, especially decreasing excessive tension and reducing biomechanical loading on anatomical structures while playing or transporting instruments. Furthermore, musicians who use Alexander Technique to organise their approach to playing or singing consistently report reduction in excessive playing-related tension and pain as well as experiencing improvements in performance quality: [4]

> At the beginning, I thought it was just about finding a better position for getting rid of the pain. Later on I realised that there is no posture or position in any sense of the words; it is all about the way of thinking and accepting sensory information. My understanding of it changes all the time and so does the way I listen and perform. Discovering the relation between the flow of sensory information in oneself and the musical flow when performing is an amazing journey in itself; and pain has no place in this journey.
> Savaas Koudounas, violinist & Alexander Technique teacher

> For many years I believed that pain after practising was a normal consequence of good work. By taking Alexander lessons I learned to be more aware of misuse. As a result, instead of playing in a way that develops repetitive practice with bad habits, I decided to make the choice to get rid of all the unnecessary stiffness which does not help to solve the real problems.
> Claire Thirion, cellist

Conclusion

Alexander Technique is an empirically developed tool that challenges faulty sensory patterns and reduces unhelpful muscle tension. It provides a strategy to increase body awareness, and has been shown to stimulate appropriate balance and effort.[47] Using Alexander Technique, musicians

can learn to be aware of how they are responding to internal impulses and external pressures and make active ongoing constructive choices in meeting the complex demands of performance and wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks to Judith Kleinman and Peter Buckoke for their kind permission to use quotes from their book Alexander Technique for Musicians in this article.

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Music Making: Communication and Creativity

By Gabriella Minnes Brandes

Making music is a psychophysical and communicative activity that involves both art and skill in a complex, ongoing and ever-changing manner. Similarly, applying Alexander Technique requires the use of a set of skills creatively.

As I reflect upon my Alexander Technique teaching practice of thirty years I realize that many of my students have been performers. I have often wondered why so many musicians find the Technique appealing. Musicians' injuries, stress and performance anxiety are well documented[1] and often lead them to seek help from the Alexander Technique. Musicians are well versed in analysing how they make music and they continuously evaluate the quality of sound that they make. Musicians have intensity and commitment as they seek ways to overcome challenges that arise from many hours of practice, and also from the particular pressures of performing in front of an audience. Though musicians are not always aware of the ways in which they use their bodies when they play, they know when they are able to achieve what they are aiming for musically. Musicians look for the "means-whereby" to achieve their goals with efficiency.

In this paper I explore the connections between Alexander Technique and music making through the analysis of interviews I conducted over a period of two years (around 2010-2012) with twenty of my Alexander students who are musicians (see Appendix A). At the time of the interviews, some of the participants were finishing their music degrees, others had been professional musicians for many years, and some were both teaching their instrument and performing. Three of the participants played guitar, three were flutists, three professional singers, three pianists, one violinist, one viola player, one cellist, one oboe player, one clarinet player, a drummer, a saxophonist, and one French horn player. Their experience in Alexander Technique ranged from six months to 15 years of private lessons with me. As I write this article in 2015, six of the participants in this project have completed their training as Alexander teachers and are teaching Alexander Technique in addition to their careers as musicians.

In the interviews I asked each of the musicians what brought them to take Alexander lessons, how they understood Alexander principles and applied them in their playing, and if they saw tensions between focusing on music and focusing on Alexander Technique. Ultimately I was interested in exploring the connections between Alexander Technique, music making and creativity. I wondered if the structure of Alexander Technique provided a set of tools for musicians to explore and enhance their creativity. (Due to the large number of interviewees I have used first names only with their instrument in brackets)

All of the musicians I interviewed started Alexander Technique lessons when they were looking for solutions to injuries and pain. Only a few were also explicitly seeking to improve their efficiency in their playing. As the musicians' experience with Alexander Technique grew, they articulated more explicitly the connections they saw between Alexander Technique and music making.

Improving the quality of sound: "I can instantly hear the difference in the freedom and flexibility of my tone"

Musicians use sound as their medium for expression. Lorna (flute) expressed the essence of playing as, "resonating with another person's experience and bringing that to life in a convincing way through sound". She noted that all sound is created by movement and Alexander Technique provides the musician with tools not to interfere with the production of their sound. She commented:

> Alexander Technique helps me with expression because it quietens my mind and nervous system. The phrasing therefore, has more clarity and is less obstructed by habit or "over-effort" and "end-gaining".

Kate (viola) explored a different connection between music making, her self-expression and Alexander Technique:

> Playing the viola is merely a way of expressing myself, my body, mind and spirit. We don't play instruments because we like the way our fingers feel when they hit the fingerboard. We play the instrument because it helps us express our selves, because we find meaning in music.

Musicians often gauge their performance through the sound they are able to produce. Guido (guitar/ukulele) explained that making music is a process of creating bridges between what he hears in his head and what he is able to execute on his instrument and what he shares when he performs. Alexander Technique provides the tools to make that bridge possible. Erika (clarinet): "I can instantly hear the difference in the freedom and flexibility of the tone." Mark (guitar): "I believe Alexander Technique principles offer me the particular means for facilitating spontaneous moments in my music-making allowing me, at times, to shift from my habitual patterns."

> "Our body is the most immediate instrument of our mind"

Once the musicians were able to identify their habits, they could inhibit them, and that opened the possibility of thinking in activity, as one commented: "One of the challenges in playing music is that it happens in real time—you are not able to stop and make a plan and then execute it, you have to think in action."

Ron (oboe) summarized how he integrated Alexander Technique into his playing: "I was able to think while I play. I am able to re-imagine the process of creating the music with my body in a much more efficient and pure manner."

As the musicians learned to identify their habits, inhibit them and think while playing they experienced less pain and more ease. In our Alexander Technique lessons we worked on applying Alexander Technique principles in order to achieve efficiency and ease in playing. Heather (cello): "I hurt less, had better attention in general, and found it easy to play!" Erika (clarinet): "As I apply Alexander Technique principles it helps the air stream work more efficiently, and my sound to be better."

When musicians play with more ease, they often exert less effort and play with less pain. They struggle less with habits that may hinder sound, and they are more available to try out new and unfamiliar ways of expression.

The musician as the instrument: "I am the instrument that will vibrate and make a more beautiful sound"

In the Bedford lecture Alexander said: "We ourselves are the instrument—each one of us is the instrument—by means of which whatever we are going to do is done."[2]

Many of the participants in the study elaborated on seeing themselves as the instrument that is honed and tuned with Alexander Technique, as they become aware of their habits, inhibit unnecessary tension and make new conscious decisions.

Domagoj (violin): "Our body is the most immediate instrument of our mind. Every musical instrument is therefore an extension of our primary instrument (ourselves). If the primary instrument isn't functioning properly, how can we expect the extensions to work?"

Erika: "Alexander Technique is the cornerstone of a successful relationship with my instrument. Because there is so much physical connection between the air column and the performance of the clarinet, understanding the head, neck, back relationship changed my attention to the air stream completely".

Lorna: "The only way you can make musical expression, whether you're a singer or instrumentalist, is through your movements and how you use yourself."

> "Alexander gives me the tools to physically use my body"

Carole (voice): "When I sing I want to rid myself of unnecessary tension which blocks vibration. So if I am aware of tensions and I consciously direct them to be released, then I as an instrument will vibrate and make a more beautiful sound. I want to sing with freedom and with a sense of total involvement of my whole body."

Jennifer (piano): "Through Alexander lessons I have developed more awareness of mind/body unity, and more ability to choose how I sit, stand, walk, and play the piano. Competing tensions are gradually being replaced by a sense of balance."

Diane (voice): "I'm not just vocal chords, breath, lungs. All of the body plays a part in the production of singing. I've realized that I have blind points in my body awareness. I have habitual tensions that play a part in inhibiting the musical sound I create. It is incredibly empowering to know that through Alexander Technique exploration it is in my power to invite and direct my body to a more alive, active, intentional sound."

Erika discussed the correlation between her awareness of herself and becoming more attentive to the musicians she was playing with in her quartet. "The Alexander Technique provides me with the ability to be so self aware so that I am no longer worried about myself, and therefore I am able to support those I play with." Increased awareness, which includes peripheral vision, auditory and kinaesthetic attention, is enhanced with the application of Alexander Technique principles.

A focus on practice: "With the Alexander Technique there is a template of constructive self-education"

Beyond discussing the sound they produced, the musicians spoke about using Alexander Technique principles to approach their practice. Heather (French horn) remarked that musicians often have experience with "self analysis in activity" as they look for ways to improve the sound they produce. Alexander Technique then serves as a lens for discovery of habits that leads to choice and potential for change.

Heather (cello): "My work is to get my mind to stay free so that I can tell my body how to do it. I have to get all the patterns and habits out of the way. Some of those patterns are physical, but some of them are mental. I thought a lot about freeing my neck at opera last night before I picked up my bow and it really helped!"

Lorna also described how she used the Alexander Technique to overcome a challenging passage: When I'm struggling with a passage that is very complicated for the fingers, if I focus on the fingers directly I will most likely fail. If instead I direct my attention to the primary control I am able to fly through the same passage with ease. Similarly, if my jaw is too tight the sound will be caged in and the tone quality severely compromised. If the jaw is hanging loose on its hinges, which we worked on in our Alexander Technique lessons then the sound comes out like a dream.

Ron: "Alexander Technique gives me the tools in order to physically use my body in order to master the instrument,

which therefore allows me to create beautiful music in the easiest way possible."

Lorna: "Alexander Technique provides a template of constructive self-education. It completely changed the way I practised. It teaches you to be totally uncompromising. You don't waste any time on inefficiency. For me, Alexander Technique is a whole outlook in terms of continuous development and continuous self-education, with the 'psycho' part of the psycho-physical leading the way. In my experience, Alexander Technique offers more than just re-education, and is a template for on-going education too."

Teaching music: "Alexander Technique has radically changed the way I teach"

Since many musicians often teach their instrument as well as perform, teaching can become a fruitful setting for the exploration of the application of Alexander Technique. The musicians spoke about learning from their students as they reflected both on their own habits and those of their students. They used Alexander Technique as a paradigm to teach about change.

Nancy (piano): "I get students thinking about using the whole self in the activity of playing. Another constant theme [in my teaching] is to do less, in order to gain more. Each time the students play, I ask them to allow more ease, first addressing muscular tension, then attending to mental tension. At each repetition I ask them to notice something different either in themselves or in the music."

Sandra (voice) commented on how through learning the Alexander Technique she learned to observe her students and to pay attention to the relationship of their head/neck/back. Jennifer started observing her students noticing their physical and mental habits at the piano: "In observing my piano students, I am becoming more attuned to the relationship between the whole body and the instrument."

Domagoj said: "Alexander Technique has allowed me to depart from my existing habits and create new ones which improved my playing technique and allowed me to produce better results by being more efficient with the use of my body." He used Alexander Technique lessons to explore efficiency of his use and the quality of his sound and those insights shaped his teaching. Similar to Alexander's investigation, Domagoj set up mirrors in his studio and methodically observed himself, learning his own habits. He traced his preparatory set with the violin, and then explored new ways of picking up and holding the violin with less tension and better coordination. These insights in turn became teaching tools to observe his students' habits and suggest new choices to them.

Challenges and tensions in performance: "In performance it becomes difficult to think of everything at once"

The musicians often noted that it was much easier to apply principles of Alexander Technique in their practice studio than in performance. Many found it challenging to be consciously sending Alexander Technique directions on top of all the other tasks that they attended to while performing (e.g., notes, rhythm, other musicians, the conductor, performance anxiety).

Ron (oboe): "I use Alexander Technique principles mainly while preparing for performance. In performance it becomes difficult to think of everything at once."

Leo (piano): "When I practise I can maintain the Alexander Technique thoughts and I still pay attention to the piano and the notes. When I perform it is too much to think about. I think that it is a matter of time that eventually I will be able to play the piano and think Alexander Technique as I perform and that is my goal."

Though Domagoj made significant changes in his playing he also realized that in performance, when the music was challenging he was reverting back to his previous habits. "If I had a month to work on the new ways of playing, I could create the desired change, but now I can only spend short periods of time exploring it every day and the rest of the time continue with the habitual way, which is now quite frustrating."

Lorna McGhee and David Harding

Guido highlighted the connection between how a musician practises and how he performs: “What we get [on stage] is an amplification of our reactions. Being on stage really shows what you have rehearsed multiplied several times. It is a reflection of what and how you have worked.”

Colin (guitar) described his process of shifting from the practice room to a performance: “If I apply Alexander Technique when practising, this is going to carry over into my performance whether it is done consciously or unconsciously.”

> “Creativity is found in playful experimentation”

Mark (guitar): “It is largely my work with Alexander Technique principles outside of the performing context that has allowed me to simply stay more present in the performing arena”. Although Mark saw a decrease in pain while applying Alexander Technique principles in performing, he raised a particular challenge that he faced: “My conscious directions during performances, though enabling me to play with decreasing amounts of pain, actually inhibited my musical interaction by creating an artificial division between my self and the music I was making. By directly taking care of my own use in the moment I was greatly limiting much of my natural ability to ‘naturally’ create music.” Mark acknowledged the use of muscle memory in playing but was seeking awareness that led to new choices in communicating his ideas: “Alexander Technique has given me more space to create and react in musical situations, as I am more aware of the mental state I am in when playing my instrument. This awareness helps me be present in performance, bringing choice and breath to moments that were previously determined solely through muscle memory.”

Lorna added to the discussion of the continuum of rehearsal to performance as she looked at the high stakes often involved in performance: “Alexander Technique is a way of learning to stay in your body, in the present moment, regardless of the pressures. Alexander Technique helps me be more courageous because through it, I acknowledge all the possibilities and I can hold all of them at the same time.”

Creativity: "An exploration, a curiosity, a constructive way to approach the unknown"

Creativity engages the human imagination using an authentic voice through spontaneous expression while unblocking obstacles to our natural flow.[3] Our unconscious habits often serve as invisible but powerful obstacles to change. When applying Alexander Technique principles, performers learn to identify their obstacles and stop them from interfering with their creative process.

The musicians who participated in this study shared the ways in which Alexander Technique enhanced their ability to concentrate, practise, learn from mistakes, and take risks as they stopped their habitual responses, finding new means-whereby to approach their music, and paying attention to their use and function. Nachmanovitch identifies similar prerequisites for creativity: "playfulness, love, concentration, practice, skill, using the power of limits, using the power of mistakes, risk, surrender, patience, courage and trust."[4]

Creativity is found in playful experimentation, "having nothing to gain and nothing to lose, working and playing around the limits and resistances of the tools we hold in our hands"[5] Lorna spoke about being creative as a process of moving from the known, familiar and habitual to the unknown: "Alexander Technique provides us with a framework for encountering the unknown. I often ask my students to work at their edge, rather than working in their comfort zone. I feel like the Alexander Technique provides a very good framework for doing that in a way that is safe. It is an exploration, a curiosity, rather than anything else. It is a very constructive way to approach the unknown, whether it is learning a new piece or learning new techniques." Similarly, Nachmanovitch describes creativity as a state of "cultivating a comfortable attitude toward not-knowing, being nurtured by the mystery of moments that are dependably surprising, ever fresh."[6]

> "Musicians are the instruments that make sound"

Alexander Technique provides a paradigm and language for exploration and discovery through play that focuses on inquiry. The Alexander principles encourage artists to become aware of their habitual patterns, observe these habits, and make choices about efficiency of use, thus providing new and creative venues that enhance authentic, artistic expression. Lorna explained the connections between skill and art and the role of Alexander Technique:

> Most musicians are under the illusion that they only have to think an idea and it will automatically be expressed in their playing. This is indeed the case when the body is free and open, but for most of us, it is wishful thinking. The body is so often a storehouse of tension and memories of past failures, which we try to defend against, and plain old bad habits that don't serve us very well. Even when one can achieve a state of physical freedom, the mind can interfere with all sorts of negative self-talk when we find ourselves in high-stakes performance situations. Alexander Technique offers us constructive tools to deal with all that. For a musician, Alexander Technique greatly increases the expressive possibilities and also greatly decreases the stress on the body.

Alexander Technique as a framework for creativity, beyond efficiency

In my first years of teaching Alexander Technique, my goal was to have musicians consciously send directions as they were performing. However as I watched my students perform and listened to how they articulated what it meant for them to apply Alexander Technique principles in activity, and specifically in performance, I reframed this goal. I now see Alexander Technique as a tool to improve use and function. I currently work with students on enhancing thoughtful choice, coordination and good use in the practice room so that these elements will shape and inform the performance.

Alexander's focus on the "means-whereby"—focusing on the process of achieving a goal and not just attending to the goal—is very helpful in considering this continuum of rehearsal to performance. When an artist views her rehearsal as a performance, and her performance as a rehearsal, she has many opportunities to be fully present, aware of her habits, inhibiting them and making choices, as she practises using Alexander's principles in activity. Performance brings occasions to work with these same principles in new, high-stakes contexts, focusing on being present and aware, and continuously making choices.

When I teach the Alexander Technique I look for ways to enhance students' awareness, coordination and the efficiency with which they use themselves. In order to do that, I observe my students and analyse their use and movement, discerning their habits and assessing if and how these interfere with good use. As I work with students, using my hands to teach, I am able to support their explorations of new ways of using themselves efficiently. I want students to discover their habits as they examine their responses to stimuli. Once they uncover their habits, they can choose to consciously inhibit them and direct, using the relationship between the head/neck/back as an indicator of improved use. As they attend to their use, students improve their functioning and are able to focus on playful explorations of new and unfamiliar ideas, sounds and narratives.

Musicians are the instruments that make sound. A piano, guitar, violin, cello or drum does not make sound until a musician plays it. The ways musicians move and breathe determine the quality of contact between themselves and their instruments, and thus determine the quality of sound that is produced. When artists see themselves as the vehicle for their expression, as the instrument through which they express themselves, Alexander Technique can provide them with specific ways to work on themselves: they hone their observation skills and increase their awareness so that they can identify their habitual responses to stimuli, creating spaces for new and creative explorations to capture unique expressions of human nature.

I see the role of an Alexander teacher to teach focusing on process rather than the end result. The teacher encourages her students to move beyond what they already know, to embrace mistakes as opportunities to move out of habitual patterns. This reciprocal teacher-student relationship is a nuanced process that calls on learners to make sense of their experiences, develop a language to capture their learning, and create bridges between theories and "real life" applications with the guidance of their teacher. It allows learners to take these new explorations and put them in new contexts.

Alexander Technique provides a safe, non-judgmental environment for such explorations. Alexander saw his work as "re-education." It is a paradigm for learning that is psychophysical and engages the whole self of the learner in a lived experience. It provides a language to discern the embodied experience of artists, performers and audience members alike who participate together in making and sharing art. Alexander Technique encourages the development of new tools to observe and describe both internally and externally the process of learning and creating. Therefore, Alexander teachers hold a unique set of skills that allow them to work with performers to enhance their skill and art.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge all the performers who have worked with me over the years and as I developed the ideas discussed in the paper, particularly those who participated in the interviews. I also want to thank the organizers of the Pender Island Flute Retreats, Gwen Klassen and Lorna McGhee, and the artistic and managing director of Opera Nuova, Kim Mattice Wanat, and all the performers for inviting me to explore these ideas with them. I particularly appreciate the thoughtful comments that Sandra Head and Lorna McGhee have made on an earlier draft of this paper.

ENDNOTES

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3. Nachmanovitch, *Free play: Improvisation in life and art.* Tarcher, Penguin, New York: (1990) p.5.
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For a fuller discussion of the relationship between performers and audience see Mark, T. C., (2012) *Motion, emotion, and love: The nature of artistic performance* Chicago, GIA Publications.

About the Writer

Gabriella Minnes Brandes teaches at the Alexander Technique Centre, Capilano University (Theatre department), Vancouver Opera, Opera Nuova, Edmonton, Pender Island Flute Retreat, and the Human Theatre Collective. Gaby is the co-director of the Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique. She researches creativity in the performing arts using Alexander Technique as a framework to explore embodiment and choice. Gaby holds a PhD in education, informing her practice and research.
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Please see Appendix on next page.

Appendix A

Table of participants

Name	Instrument	Alexander Technique experience *	Current Occupation
Bae Leo	Piano	2 yrs	Performer
Barron Laura	Flute	5 yrs occasionally	Flute performer Flute teacher
Block Erika	Clarinet	2 yrs	Clarinet teacher at Western Washington University. Fifth Inversion Woodwind Quintet.
Cashin Colin	Guitar	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher
Condie Jennifer	Piano	5 yrs	Pianist / Piano teacher
Davis Carole	Voice	Alexander teacher training** 18 yrs	Alexander and voice teacher
Hay Heather	Cello	4 yrs 10 yrs occasionally	Assistant principal cello, Vancouver Opera Cello teacher Instructor, Capilano University,
Head Sandra	Voice	12 yrs 5 yrs occasionally	Singer, Vancouver Opera Voice teacher
Heistek Guido	Guitar, ukulele, harmonica, voice	Alexander teacher training**	Performer Music teacher Alexander teacher
Hutchinson Chris	Flute	3 yrs occasionally	Performer, flutist
Ivanovic Domagoj	Violin	4 yrs 5 yrs occasionally	Violinist Vancouver Opera Violin teacher
Mann Ron	Oboe	1.5 yrs	Performer Oboe instructor, Yale College
McGhee Lorna	Flute	4 yrs 3 yrs occasionally	Principal flute Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Flute teacher
Scherk Emlyn	Drums	1 yr	Professional drummer Drum teacher
Sicsic Nancy	Piano	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher Piano teacher Church musician
Parnell Kate	Viola	6 months	Choral director and college instructor
Speirs Diane	Voice	6 months	Singer, Vancouver Opera Voice teacher
Vasak Mark	Guitar	Alexander teacher training** 5 yrs 6 yrs occasionally	Performer Guitar teacher Alexander teacher Occupational therapist
Walker Heather	French horn	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher Professional musician, French horn, Vancouver Opera, Vancouver Island Symphony
Ward Adam	Saxophone	6 months	Music educator

* Indicating the time studied with me
** Teachers were all trained in the Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique

Beginner at the Piano

by Pedro de Alcantara

A few years ago, an Alexander teacher I met while travelling asked me about my work with musicians. "Do you think musicians' problems come from their spending so much time sitting?" The fellow was intelligent and sensitive, but his question revealed a blind spot.

We human beings are rather complicated. Our problems have multiple, intertwining causes. In my opinion, the one thing uniting all of us—musicians and non-musicians alike—is that the causes and symptoms of our problems are *existential*. We hurt not because we sit for long stretches, but because of the challenges of life itself.

If we are to be of any help as Alexander teachers, we need to get the big picture on our students. I'm offering you a big-picture view of my existential struggles as a case study, and as an invitation for you to take a broad approach to teaching musicians (as well as anyone else). In brief, it ain't about the chair!

The Journey So Far

I grew up in Brazil. At age 19 I left for the US, where I studied the cello for six years. After getting my degrees in performance I went to London, where I trained as an Alexander teacher, certifying in 1986—nearly thirty years ago. Subsequently I wrote several books, including two specifically for musicians. *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* was published in 1997 by Oxford University Press (OUP), and later translated into French, German, and Japanese. *Integrated Practice: Coordination, Rhythm & Sound* was published by OUP in 2011. On account of the many things I learned over the decades, I completely rewrote *Indirect Procedures*, and a second edition—more properly a new book with a few shared characteristics with the earlier version—was published by OUP in 2013.

My books were well received and opened many doors for me. I roam the world, coaching musicians in individual sessions and group workshops. I work with beginners, amateurs, concert artists, singers, and instrumentalists from every arena including jazz, folk and world music.

Early Performing

Early on in my professional life I stopped performing. I liked saying that my true calling was teaching and writing. There have always been fine musicians who didn't perform and who dedicated their lives to pedagogy alone, and I was one of them. In truth, I had a deeply ambivalent relationship

with the cello, with the stage, and with myself. Whenever I turned the cello into a professional or artistic goal, I ran into roadblocks, sometimes giving perfectly crappy performances. It was only when I used the cello as a means to exploration and discovery that I was happy; and to be happy, I needed to "give up the cello," as it were—that is, to give up pursuing a performing career as a cellist playing the canonical repertory. It took me 25 years to put this end-gaining version of the cello aside. At first I considered that I was on a long sabbatical, then I considered that I had permanently retired from performing. About seven years ago, a series of circumstances led me to start improvising and composing. I found myself playing the cello and singing at the same time; playing and whistling; playing and howling. I found myself playing the cello in unorthodox tunings and unorthodox positions. I found myself playing the piano and also singing while accompanying myself at the piano. Early on, these explorations were nothing but fun and games. In time, they became an entire aesthetic and I began giving public performances again. Now I go on stage and do the craziest musical things with unalloyed joy. My new music has been called "shamanic jazz" and "tribal classic." Listeners have had quasi-spiritual experiences during concerts and I myself find that my music flows from a healing source. It's quite a trip.

Despite my new-found freedom, some questions remained. Like much trance-inducing music, my "tribal classic" compositions were simple in construction. In itself, this wasn't a problem. But I suspected that the simplicity arose not because I chose it, but because I lacked the means to write and play more elaborate music. There were many reasons, but one was obvious: I was a lousy pianist. Back in college, where all music majors needed to acquire minimum keyboard proficiency, I had had derisory piano lessons. Now, performing in public, I was essentially a self-taught pianist with an awkward and incomplete technique. After much thought, I decided to take piano lessons afresh.

Back To Lessons

A friend of mine is a first-class professional flautist who plays the piano well. For some reason he's jealous of my piano lessons. "I wish I could take piano lessons again," he says. Strictly speaking, there are no practical reasons for him not to do so. All he needs is to choose a teacher among the many fine pianists he knows. I teased him about it. I said, "What feels better, to be proactive and take lessons or just not to take lessons and stay jealous of me?" "Staying jealous. It suits my personality better." Behind the joke there was a real emotion without a good name—so, I'll name it jealous-not-proactive. It's a handicapping emotion, and I confess to suffering from it intermittently yet steadily, in different areas of my life. One of my students in New York City is a musical and dedicated amateur pianist. It dawned upon me, in the middle of teaching her, that I was in fact jealous-not-proactive as regarded her abilities and her discipline. Back in Paris I contacted Alexandre Mion and asked him to teach me.

> "For a few months I was the stereotypical beginner"

He and I go back a long time. He was among my first students when I moved to France 25 years ago and we've done hundreds of hours of music work together. Alexandre is a superb pianist who teaches at a conservatory just outside Paris.

We met for a first lesson in the summer of 2013. I played for him, he showed me some exercises and we talked about my getting pedagogical materials. A couple of days afterward, Alexandre sent me a text message. It said (in my words now), "Pedro, I thought a lot about our lesson. I think it'd be better for you to start at the piano as a complete beginner. Buy the Méthode de Piano by Hervé et Pouillard." The method in question is meant for young children, with little drawings of animals on most pages. It starts from zero, both pianistically (sit like this, put your arms up like this) and musically (this is called a score; this is called the treble clef; this is called the bass clef). On my second piano lesson, I became a complete beginner, a little boy pretending to be a 55-year-old man.

For a few months, I was the stereotypical beginner. Going to a lesson, I would leave the score at home. I'd fiddle with nothing at home the day of a lesson, then leave in a hurry and arrive late. I once got off at the wrong metro station. During the lessons I was emotive and unfocused, incapable of starting and finishing a simple four-bar melody without making mistakes. I was a tender, handicapped little boy.

Stories of Me

I often tell myself stories regarding my body and its various parts. I'm left-handed; that's a big part of my story. Eyes, too, merit many chapters. I'm cross-eyed, very short-sighted in my left eye, less so in the right; I use each eye in

alternation, not both together; wearing glasses, going to the eye doctor, having operations in childhood . . . thousands of habits, behaviours, assumptions, memories and emotions having to do with my eyes; endless story elements, endlessly spun. I can go on at length also about my feet, my ankles, my knees, my belly, my chin, and every last bit of my bodily universe, including nostrils, ear canals, eyelashes, nails, everything. I believe this kind of storytelling is an integral part of existence for many people.

> "I think I had a strand of unresolved and unaddressed issues going back to my childhood"

The danger lies in confusing the stories with a sort of objective truth. "My hands really are like this, by birth, anatomically. It's *true*!" You can certainly measure your hands and prove that the index fingers are longer than the little fingers. But the story you tell is a *story*—a work of fiction. The hand about which you tell so many stories is a character in a drama, written and produced by your innermost self, for an audience that includes you and also the rest of the world. Perceptions, sensations, and memories "become" your hand, the hand with which you play the piano.

Over the decades I told myself many piano-hand stories: my right hand is less structured than the left ("Look at it, for Chrissake!"), my ring and little fingers are awkward ("By birth! I can prove it!"), I'm double-jointed, I'm left-handed, I have cello-playing habits. On some level, all these things

are true in themselves. But this doesn't need to predetermine the hands' behaviour or my feelings about them. In daily practice, you can put most or all of your time at the service of improving coordination, becoming focused and centred, learning notes and fingerings, memorizing melodies, and integrating the use of the hands into the larger context of piano playing; or you can keep telling yourself stories about what you can't do. Perversely, the very telling of the story handicaps you, proving that the story is "true." If you're screaming your lungs out, you can't hear a thing; if you're swallowing gobs of unmasticated food, you can't breathe; if you're shaking violently, you can't balance yourself on a beam; if you're incessantly telling stories about what you can't do, you can't do anything. "Man, you're so busy with those stories!"

Alexandre was patient and sympathetic, without overindulging me. As a teacher, he must have seen the likes of me a thousand times. He witnessed my struggles, allowed me space and time, and kept giving me clear, helpful instruction. In each lesson I had fifty good reasons to love my teacher and be thankful for his presence.

Beginning Again

I misused myself like anyone else. I'd often look at my hands while playing, lowering my head and dragging my neck down with it. To the overly sensitive type, every remark from a teacher can be construed as an insult. Alexandre might say something about a few notes I played ("You're rushing the end of the third bar"), and in quick succession I'd take the comment as an insult, see the absurdity of taking it as an insult, and make a joke about feeling insulted. The joke allowed me to pass from negative to positive energy, and then resume the practical work that the lesson entailed. Every technical aspect at the piano has psychological dimensions to the player or student. Your sense of propriety is triggered and you keep making judgments of right and wrong, ugly and beautiful, acceptable and perverted. "You want me to stick my index finger all the way between those two black keys? That's sick!"

We worked through the materials on the teaching method. Every two pages or so, the exercises and little pieces introduced new demands. Early on, my practice at home was like my playing in lessons: terribly unintelligent. It became useful to have short, simple goals: play a single note, or two notes, maybe three or four. If your goal for the moment is to clarify a sequence of four notes, to play five notes is

to end-gain, to escape your responsibility, to indulge your habits and emotions. It may sound punctilious or castrating, but properly focusing on solving small problems is the most cost and time-effective tool. Call it the *means-whereby principle*, if you wish.

One day the assigned piece was a sixteen-bar minuet by Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, one of Johann Sebastian Bach's sons. While practising the minuet I remembered—so to speak—an exercise that I myself designed to help pianists who came to study the Alexander Technique with me. The exercise is a short melody with specific intervals and fingerings, inviting the pianist to organize his or her hands with a focus on the anchoring role of the thumbs, the roles of pronation and supination in the use of the arms, and the play of opposing forces between the elbows and the wrists. By the time I was learning the minuet, I had already taught this exercise dozens of times in lessons and workshops, and I had also practised it hundreds of times for my pleasure and enlightenment. I describe it in detail in my book *Integrated Practice*, where I call it "The Song of Pronation." When I say that I remembered the exercise, I mean that I stopped struggling against the piano; I practised my "Song of Pronation" in many guises; I grafted variations of it onto the minuet; and I finally got the hang of using myself well at the piano, playing a piece from beginning to end without leaking psychic energy. Essentially, I became my own Alexander teacher, my own piano teacher, my own healer, my own psychotherapist; I became a talented beginner adult at the piano, and my learning accelerated considerably.

The Back Story Emerges

Why wasn't I this talented beginner from the first lesson onward? I think I had a strand of unresolved and unaddressed issues going back to my childhood. I'm a Gemini. It doesn't matter whether or not you believe in astrology. I myself don't put any store in predictive horoscopes, but I enjoy using some of the symbols of astrology in order to look at myself. As a Gemini I am "two," that is, two potentialities. I like calling them the *Brazilian* and the *German-Swiss*. I grew up in downtown São Paulo in an average Brazilian household, speaking Brazilian Portuguese and soaking up the values of the prevalent culture, which on the main comes from Portugal and its traditions. Some of my ancestors were German-Swiss: the Krähembühls from Signau near Bern, who emigrated to Brazil in the mid-19th century. Growing

up, you might not be acutely aware that some of the things that you think, feel, and do are directed by a foreign hand, so to speak; you have a sort of connection to people you've never met, and you end up being a bit like what your German-Swiss great-great-grandparents may have been.

I'll allow myself to deal in clichés and caricatures, as they contain useful information. The caricature Brazilian likes to wing it, to postpone doing things, to bend rules and regulations, to foil the authorities, to tease, to tell jokes. Avoidance is key. The caricature German-Swiss loves the clock and keeps track of it slavishly. If the train is scheduled to leave at 12:31, it'll leave at 12:31 exactly, to the second. What must be done shall be done. There are punishments and humiliations unto those who don't do what must be done, and generally speaking it's easier to do what must be done than to avoid it. Reliability is key.

You may have guessed that I'm referring to two opposing forces that we all have inside us: the archetypal energies of Improvisation and Structure. The Brazilian and the German-Swiss are my nicknames for them. Life in Brazil does, indeed, embody many aspects of the archetypical improvisatory energy. Song, dance, and laughter are part of it; but so are unreliable institutions and individuals, unfinished civic projects, and a thousand other insecurities and uncertainties. The Brazilian dominant culture is anti-education. The country's first university was founded in 1930, less than a hundred years ago. Until then, there existed a few colleges here and there, but for the most part the children of the elite went abroad for its education and the masses remained unschooled. Public schools are extremely inadequate.

Many Brazilians are fatalistic. The thought is, "Why bother?" One of our recent presidents, Luís Inácio da Silva (universally known as Lula), quit school after second grade. In my view, he and his legion of supporters are actually proud of his lack of education. To put it bluntly, many Brazilians feel that education is bad, ignorance is good; method is bad, winging it is good.

Brazilians are talented, but often not accomplished. It's very difficult to create a professional symphony orchestra composed exclusively of Brazilian musicians. It's necessary to import foreign musicians, because the locals lack training—that is, sustained, comprehensive, deep, and broad training, plus the long-term individual discipline without which training is useless. Materially as well as symbolically, the Brazilian caricature I'm sketching is someone who doesn't like to do homework. The country thought it was going to wing it at the World Cup in 2014, and the result was a disaster in every way, including on the soccer field, where the other guys beat us, 7-1—I mean, the guys who like doing homework and who are born to it.

My music education in Brazil was piecemeal. There was no music training in the public schools. I had private cello lessons and took my own initiative finding chamber groups or orchestras to play with. I didn't have to practise, the way a kid in our archetypical German-Swiss household would have to practice; the music lessons had little importance in the larger scheme of things. I went for months without taking lessons. It was all hit-and-miss, unfocused, and directionless. I did have many interesting experiences. I attended excellent concerts (often going out on my own from age 12 onward) and made friends among the other young musicians. But there simply wasn't enough depth, continuity, or commitment to my training.

When I was about 15, I joined a string orchestra in a wealthy Steiner school at the heart of the German community. The kids there were terribly good-looking and confident. They spoke multiple languages and seemed to know their place in the world. One of the cellists in the ensemble was a tall and imposing guy who eventually emigrated back to Europe, where he developed a brilliant career as a cellist and conductor. On his website he calls himself a Czech musician and makes absolutely no mention of growing up Brazilian.

> "Aches and troubles are existential not physical or psychological"

All human beings have multiple energies within. I'm like everyone else in having different talents, strengths, weaknesses, national and cultural legacies, invisible loyalties, and so on. Improvisation and Structure both live in me; I am the Brazilian and the German-Swiss. For all of us, the difficulty lies in developing not only our multiple energies, but integrating them into a balanced whole. I've achieved this integration in parts of my life. When teaching, I draw from knowledge and practical experience, while being guided by intuitive improvisations that get to the core of a student's problem and come up with fantastically effective solutions. In the middle of a lesson, the gods—as it were—pass through me and create a new exercise, a new vocabulary, a new concept, an insight or three words or a gesture; the problem disappears, the student feels tremendous relief,

and the world shines with a magic sparkle. Sometimes the changes that a musician goes through during one of my workshops are so huge as to appear literally miraculous. And yet there's a structured method at work—a method with principles and protocols.

As a practicing musician (distinct from a coach for other musicians), over the decades I neglected the structured method without which an improvisatory spirit cannot express itself properly. I didn't do enough of my homework as a cellist, as a singer, as a composer, and of course as a pianist. I tried to wing it—and I failed more often than I succeeded. This arose partly out of my Brazilian heritage, partly out of my being a Gemini, partly out of my "left-handedness"—in sum, out of everything I was born with from head to toe, and what I chose to do with it.

And Then Revelations

It's difficult to define healing. We might quickly agree that a barefoot walk on the beach at sunset will have a healing effect on a stressed-out fellow. But catching sight of a pretty face, listening to a child laugh, hearing bells toiling, eating a tangerine in season, saying hello to a stranger, and any one thing can also have healing effects. The tangerine will dissolve anxieties, get old pains to lift, change your mood, obliterate bad memories, and so on. My piano lessons are healing; I consider my piano teacher a healer, or a healer to me. It's not only the intelligence of his pianistic approach that I find healing; it's also his steady presence, his wry humour, his patience, his own life experience, and my certainty that he's "for me" and not "against me." Ultimately, I think healing means to pass from "I can't (and I feel bad about it)" to "I can (and I feel good about it)." And Alexandre has been my guide in this passage.

My piano lessons have become lessons in integrating the Brazilian and the German-Swiss, integrating the over-quick intelligence with the over-slow body, integrating the past with the present and the future. I believe integration requires mourning—that is, acknowledging the hurts that prevent integration, embodying and expressing the emotions that those hurts come from, and allowing the hurts to have their last hurrah before joy and pleasure become the primary emotion in one's life. My hurts hadn't had their acknowledgment, so they needed to have multiple hurrahs over many months before agreeing to dissipate.

Homework doesn't mean only the little bits of technical practice you have to do in order to learn your pieces. It

means to work on yourself in multiple dimensions, facing the various tasks at hand without avoiding them, without fudging, without fooling yourself or other people. Homework is permanent and immediate; it takes place *right now*, not later. And because I finally agreed to do my homework, everything in my life—including my cello practice, my writing schedule, or my own pedagogical skills—has changed for the better, because I'm here, now; not there, later.

Aches and troubles are existential, not physical or psychological. Any one symptom in anyone's life exists in a context of thoughts, feelings, sociocultural realities, and stories. As Alexander teachers we need to become aware of our students' stories, which are inseparable from their experiences and perceptions; and we also need to become aware of our own stories, because they determine what we do as teachers and human beings. We might consider that the use of the self is the unfolding of a story. Then we might want to become experts in *embodied narratives*.

Each student—musician or non-musician, beginner or advanced—has individual needs, and as a teacher you might develop practical ways of meeting these needs. But every student has universal needs as well: the need for acknowledgment, space and time, laughter, and healing. If you aren't a trained musician and if you feel incapable of solving individual, specific instrumental or vocal problems, don't worry. Simply give your students space and time (a.k.a. inhibition and direction), and you'll serve them well.

About the Writer

Pedro de Alcantara is a musician, writer, and teacher. His books include Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique and Integrated Practice: Coordination, Rhythm & Sound, both published by Oxford University Press. Pedro lives in Paris and travels the world giving master classes and workshops.

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Violinist in Balance: An Interdisciplinary Approach

By Crissman Taylor

I initially came to the Alexander Technique because of my own violin playing difficulties. The opportunity for long-term observation of others only began for me in 1991 in my new job as Alexander Technique teacher at the Utrecht Conservatory.

I discovered that all the violinists had difficulty securing the instrument without tension. I thought, what would be the use of my work as an Alexander teacher, helping them to free the neck, back and arms, if the rest of the week they had to clamp down with the jaw, hike up the shoulder and press?

A chance for a research project arose and was taken. Between 2000-2005 at the conservatory we charted the link between ill-fitting chin and shoulder rests and recurrent difficulties in use in playing. We custom-fitted chin rests and shoulder rests progressively throughout one school year, during which the players received private lessons and group instruction weekly.

Towards the end of the research, the musicians surprised us with this discovery: as excessive muscle tension and cramped joints eased and pain or discomfort disappeared, they were able to perceive the more delicate, pleasurable movements associated with violin playing. As heads came up from cramped playing positions, students reported being better able to observe their interaction with their instrument, leading to an increased sense of technical control. In other words, a combination of ergonomic playing analyses, progressive equipment changes and Alexander lessons helped the students to improve sensory appreciation in relation to their playing.

After the research was published online, we were inundated with requests from violinists and violists for assistance. We decided to set up the Violinist in Balance team to assist individual players to undergo a similar program of Alexander Technique supported by ergonomic help.[1]

As more players contacted us, it became clear that the topic we had uncovered was not widely known or taught in the violin and viola-playing world. Traditional violin and viola technique tends to concentrate on the arms and hands, referring mainly to "bowing and fingering technique." Combing the literature and asking around, we realized that there was little in any method that mentioned the role of the neck in the coordination of the whole player.

Often even the best players have not been given much choice in equipment or an education that includes coordination at the core. Violin teachers will sometimes describe how they hold their instrument as if it is possible for everyone to do the same, regardless of build or personal playing style of the student. Players are very loyal to their teachers. It is essential for Alexander teachers to be sensitive to this loyalty when teaching conservatory students. Fine string players and teachers demand our respect and we should listen to them, since they have spent years mastering their craft. Respect should also be given to the precious relationship between the professional player and his/her instrument. One must not interfere with the delicate balance of this relationship, but take the cue from the player on how to introduce new options.

Musicians tend to suffer in silence. In my own conservatory studies, I had encountered a certain prejudice: when students struggle with psycho-physical problems they can be labeled "untalented." Students often cite famous violinists who can "play with any equipment." It is no wonder that students keep quiet about their troubles.

Is Good Use Enough?

I sometimes hear from Alexander teaching colleagues:

"If your use is good enough, you should be able to use any equipment."

My feeling is: why bother using the wrong tools? Better use empowers us to choose our tools more wisely for each task. And there are not many tasks in life that require one to move freely while clamping something between jaw and collarbone! Still, I decided to ask my violin-playing colleagues what they thought about these sentiments.

Ill-fitting equipment leads to sideways compression of neck and shoulder tension.

Length and rotation of neck possible with customised chin rest.

Esther Visser: “I don’t agree. With some hardware you can really disturb your use. If you give someone a chin rest that is too high or a shoulder rest that hooks over the shoulder, it totally fixes you. Even if your use is very good, you will still be fixed by that instrument.”

Gilles Rullman: (laughs) “You would need very, very good use. I think you could hardly expect anyone to develop the use needed to work with anything. If the hardware is so loose [that it causes] a lot of sliding of the instrument down the shoulder, it is incredibly hard to not try and grip it. And if [the chin rest] is so low compared to your neck then you will have to do this (bends his neck and pulls his head down to the chin rest), and you can do this with good use and not suffer too much, but, it still is not really advisable to do so.”

Another problem is that traditional equipment generally forces the instrument into an inconvenient position for bowing and fingering. The instrument is out of alignment to the natural range for the joint movements of arms, wrist and hands. This distorts the playing environment, causing overstretch and cramping of the arm and hand joints at different moments during playing.

> “Violinists often resemble expert gymnasts in neck braces!”

Playing distortion is so common that the movements used to counteract it are seen as normal and are often incorporated into playing techniques. Certain misuses of the arms and hands are then no longer seen as compensatory techniques to an ill-ordered playing environment, but as techniques to be desired and to be practised. When the instrument is placed to facilitate natural range of movement, these compensatory techniques are no longer necessary. Players are generally attached to them nonetheless.

Players are also attached to the methods they use to secure the instrument. Often these methods are also compensations for ill-fitted equipment, which in turn are incorporated into string-teaching methods.

One method largely in use advocates clamping the violin between jaw and shoulder alone, then dropping the arms and marching around the room. The theory behind this is that the left hand will be free to move if the instrument is clamped between the head and shoulder. Of course, we know that an immobilized head, neck and back does not contribute to freedom of movement in the arms.

Another method advises relaxation, and involves dropping the weight of the head forward and down on to the chin rest. However, the weight idea is usually taken too far, and the neck is bent over further than the natural range of the upper vertebrae, interfering with the chance of forward and up. This is often accompanied with the advice to “relax the left arm,” which generally causes the player to disconnect an already tense arm from the energy of the trunk, making the whole left side hang. It also disturbs one of the supports of the instrument, an active left hand.

So, without the ability to go up and do as little as possible, the player has often taken advice to stiffen and clamp, or to go floppy, and has landed in a real pickle before they come to the Alexander teacher. Good players very often have found their own solution, but the language and imagery of the violin

This chin rest would require the player to pull the head down to play

world does not universally include coordination at the centre. Violinists often resemble expert gymnasts in neck braces!

As Alexander teachers we of course wish that they could free the neck and come in to their length and width and play without clamping anything between head and shoulder. However, in most cases, if the player were to send the head forward and up and free the shoulders, the instrument would fall on the floor!

A violin has the tendency to slip away especially in those moments when the left hand, the fingering hand, needs to slide along the strings away from the face, pulling the instrument with it. It is at those moments when a small nod of the head at the top of the spine can bring the jaw in contact with the chin rest, allowing the player to secure the instrument without compromising poise. However, this ideal is almost never possible, as the chin rest is often nowhere in sight. On top of that, shoulder rests under the instrument do not provide sufficient support in the right place to allow the shoulder girdle to remain free.

Good use does not mean accepting all situations as they come. Improved use provides us with many chances to observe ourselves, the environment, our tools and the choice to stop the habits. From a chair to a chin rest, we can then make informed choices of how to use our tools and what they should be. We can also choose to alter or exchange them. Good use opens up chances to invent something new. In the context of improved use, giving people more choices becomes both possible and useful.

New Choices

The equipment should function as a kind of addition to the human structure and its buoyant direction, bringing the instrument and player closer. In creation of custom equipment we are looking for a chin rest and shoulder rest that improves the dynamic and spatial environment for playing, allowing the players to:

- move their arms, wrists and hands within a natural range of movement
- while applying their best use of head, neck and back

When the chin rest fits and the player can turn and nod the head and find the chin rest, then the contact of the jaw on the chin rest can contribute to the “up” in the spine and torso, instead of decreasing it. Actively securing the instrument does not then detract from a powerful up but contributes to it. In order for this to work the chin rest must be formed to the jaw shape and neck length and the desired position of the instrument, so that the balance of the head on the top vertebrae is respected to the millimeter.

In addition, the shoulder rest must not push on the acromion and chest muscle, limiting movement. For that reason, we developed a collarbone rest that supports the instrument better and yet allows for movement of the shoulder girdle. The wedge-shaped cushions built into the rest create a “plateau” for the violin.

© Vanessa Abajo Perez

Customised chin rest still leaves room to move

Of course, getting used to a new spatial environment and way of securing the instrument takes some getting used to. The Alexander teacher is even more important for the player after the equipment has been fitted during this reorientation period. With Alexander support, we find that reorientation to the new placement of the instrument goes more quickly.

Research and case studies

In sports, much is invested in the correct equipment and coaching. In music, this is just beginning. Yet, there is plenty of suffering in the music business, ranging from constant pain and physical injuries to frustrated talent and broken careers. In 1997 the *Fédération Internationale des Musiciens* (FIM) surveyed 57 orchestras worldwide. Throughout the world, the results were consistent: 56% had suffered pain when playing within the last year [19% of these were violinists] and 34% experienced pain more than once a week. The most common sites of pain were the neck, shoulders and back. In 19%, the pain was severe enough to stop performance…the musicians themselves attributed [their pain] to "doing it wrong" (e.g. poor posture, bad practice technique, lack of fitness, stress). Many of these problems are preventable. To the question "do you think your college or academy gave you sufficient help in preparing for the stresses and strains of being an orchestral musician?" the answer in 83% was "no."[2] A Finnish medical study of teenage violinists involving x-rays over time showed that playing the violin or viola can affect the growth of the skull. The skulls of the players grew crooked due to pressure on the jaw and to the increased muscle growth on the right side of the jaw and face that they needed to counterbalance the weight of the instrument on the left. Their teeth (incisors) were pushed forward and distorted due to the asymmetrical pressure exerted on the jaw. The researchers called for "the creation of ergonomically designed support equipment in order to diminish possible future maladies among professional violinists."[3,4]

I have been surprised at some of the issues I have seen in the past twenty years, often referred to me by doctors. They range from an experienced violin teacher who cannot breathe normally at night because his chin rest has been pushing into his esophagus for 40 years and has bent it sideways, to a teenager whose sternum has turned sideways towards the heart due to pressure of the shoulder rest. Players in the prime of their playing career confront neck hernias or development of bone spurs due to having to move to the music against a backdrop of immobility in neck or shoulder girdle. I saw a 15-year-old diagnosed with scoliosis who was told that she would have to wear a full-body brace for five years, 24 hours a day. A second opinion at the musicians' clinic of the Amsterdam Medical Centre linked the twist in her back to violin playing. (Brace not needed, but change of habit and equipment).

With these issues being researched and recognized, the climate of self-blame and silence may slowly be changing, offering a chance for timely solutions.

As one conservatory student said:

"The most important thing I found out was that I was not the problem, I just needed to find a way to solve the problem."

Ergonomics and End-gaining

You do not want to measure and fit to a shortened, narrowed frame. Nor can you stretch out clients to an approximation of their true length and width before the fitting and expect them to be able to adapt to your ideal equipment later. You cannot convince clients to give up habits suddenly when they have developed these habits over years in order to survive in their profession. You need to give them room to change, experiment and improve.

One certainly can't improve the dynamic relationship between the player and his instrument by equipment alone. Even the best equipment will not keep people from clamping, pulling down, stiffening and all of the habits that cause havoc in playing the violin or viola. Yet, the worst equipment will certainly help them to do so.

Twenty years of creating chin rests and shoulder rests by hand, one-by-one for hundreds of players has allowed us to amass a body of experience and ergonomic information that can be put to use.

One thing is clear, it takes both an Alexander eye and experience in violin or viola playing, plus a new set of skills to fit players successfully and guide them through the changes in their use. Then, you need the skilled technicians to create equipment you have designed.

Finished custom chin rests by Lies Muller, finished by Tim Warburton.

Team Work

At the Oundle School in England, a team has been developed over the past three years. Julia Cowper works together with violin teacher Tim Warburton supported by the head of strings Angus Gibbon, head of music Quentin Thomas, and the string and Alexander teachers in residence. The pupils, aged 11-18, receive a program of Alexander lessons and individual fittings and their equipment is altered as they grow.

This trained team is backed up by our team in Holland. We have developed a series of 60 chin rests to select from and each collarbone rest is made to measure. Tim has also trained with our chin rest maker to craft individual custom chin rests as needed.[5]

Meanwhile, back in Holland, trials of new technologies have been carried out with our string-playing Alexander colleagues in Holland and applied at the conservatory with the help of string teachers and their students. Using 3D printing technologies we can craft a digital design of a chin rest and produce it immediately. After the client has tried it, changes can be made to the design on the computer and a new model created. Modular sets of clavicle rests can be assembled to match each trial chin rest. This way, the equipment can change over time and the client can be part of the designing of it by being able to feel what new options might provide for him. As he progresses in improving his playing and use, the equipment can change with him.

None of this is of use without the re-training of cramped playing habits and general use. The role of the Alexander teacher is crucial and we are hoping that more colleagues will come forward who wish to add further skills to what they already offer their violin-playing clients. From helping instrumentalists go through equipment changes to learning to fit devices there are many layers of specialised skills to learn. However, with an interdisciplinary approach, combining Alexander Technique, knowledge of string playing, informed ergonomics and technology, we can support a healthier relationship between musicians and their instruments.

If you are interested in participating in workshops or training courses on this topic, please contact us at info@artistinbalance.org

Endnotes

1. The "Violinist in Balance" team in Holland consists of Crissman Taylor, Alexander Technique teacher and violinist, and technicians Lies Muller of Muziek en Ambacht and Niek Gersen of Niek's Fabriek. The team works in consort with Alexander colleagues around the world. Clients to be fitted are requested to take lessons before, during and after the fitting process. Our clients are both amateurs and professionals, with players from such orchestras as the Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Netherlands Philharmonic, Chicago Opera, Staatskapele Berlin, Radio Kamer Philharmonie, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Gelderseorkest, concertmasters of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic and the Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra, and faculty and students from Royal College, Amsterdam Conservatory, and Guildhall School of Music, among others. Oundle School (Peterborough, England) applies the Alexander work with our principles and equipment for all of their violin and viola pupils between the ages of 11 and 18. (Research description and results at www.violinistinbalance.nl)
2. Wynn Parry, "Managing the physical demands of musical performance" *Musical Excellence: Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance* Williamon, A. Editor, Oxford University Press: (2004) pp. 42-43.
3. Kovero, Könönen, Pirinen, "The effect of violin playing on the bony facial structures in adolescents" *European Journal of Orthodontics* 19(4): (1997) p. 369-375.
4. Kovero, "Les effets du jeu du violin sur les dimensions facials et le fréquence de dysfoncionnements tempo-mandibulaire chez des adolescents," Institut d'odontologie, Université de Helsinki, Médecine des Arts, (1999) pp. 10-12.
5. The Violinist in Balance Basic Chin Rest Series is produced in collaboration with the violin store Willem Bouman en zns. in the Hague. There are eight heights, three positions, two different chin rest cups and two tilts. Contact us for more info.

About the Writer

Crissman Taylor has taught for 25 years at the Utrecht Conservatorium, building an integrated Alexander curriculum. She founded Utrecht Alexander Technique Institute for Musicians and Artist in Balance. A professional singer and violinist, she trained at the Boston Centre for the Alexander Technique, Harvard University, Manhattan School of Music, and Utrecht Conservatorium.
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Photos by Espressomedia and Crissman Taylor

Practising The Practice

by Evangeline Benedetti

The visiting musician asked the New York City cab driver, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Practise!"

This age-old joke is the story of a musician's life, actually my life. As a member of the New York Philharmonic, I have played in Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, now David Geffen Hall, at Lincoln Center and most of the major concert halls of the world. It took practice, indeed.

As a child, I practised to get better. I practised more to get into conservatory, as the competition for admission was tough. During those college years I practised a minimum of three hours a day, not including rehearsals and performances which often added up to six or more hours a day behind the cello. In fact, practising until you nearly "dropped dead" was sort of a badge of honour.

A few years after earning my degrees and playing my Carnegie Recital Hall debut, Leonard Bernstein selected me to become a member of the New York Philharmonic when I was twenty-five years old. Although I was rather young for such a position, more remarkably, I was a woman and at that time only the second female member to become tenured and the first female cellist in the 125 year history of that institution.

One might think that my practising days were over—that I had arrived, but no, I had only just begun. The vast repertoire of an orchestra the caliber of the New York Philharmonic required enormous amounts of practice while participating in an intense rehearsal and performance schedule. There are at least four rehearsals and four concerts every week with different repertoire to be performed at each weekly series; world premiers, recordings, television productions and tours—themselves containing several alternating concert programs. I practised as we toured European capitals, major cities in South America and the far east.

Practice is the life of a professional musician. Fortunately, practising is fuelled by a passion for music and a desire to play at the highest level, so it is a genuine labour of love. If we are to believe neuroscientist and psychologist, Daniel Levitin, 10,000 hours will be just about enough time to become an expert at anything,[1] although this goes against Alexander's most fundamental premise: that it is *how* we practise, rather than *how much*. If we follow Levitin's claim for now at least, at four hours a day, every day of the year (no holidays exempt), this means practising nearly seven years; at six hours a day, more than four and a half years. These hours mean practice room time only of attentive, concentrated practice and do not include rehearsals and performances. So, to be realistic, three hours a day of this kind of practice is nearly all most can do, therefore it takes more than nine years for the average musician to become accomplished, which is the usual amount of time devoted to earn Bachelor and Master degrees combined, plus the hours of preparation to get into a conservatory setting.

This intensity of practising and performing began to take its toll. Aches and pains that had been controllable became worse and begged for my attention. The pain between my spine and left shoulder blade persisted. At last, I sought the help of Alan Rusk, a doctor at New York University Hospital's rehabilitation department.

> "Practising until you nearly dropped dead was a badge of honour"

The pain between my spine and left shoulder blade had persisted. He understood my problem as he was an amateur violist with similar pains. He quickly dug his finger into the muscular knot that was the symptom and prescribed lessons with Deborah Caplan to learn the Alexander Technique. What a life-changing event. This prescription not only helped me out of my pain, but also showed me the path for changing life long habits. I loved it so much I eventually trained to be a teacher to share this experience with others.

A lesson with Debbie was one of the highlights of my week. It was reminiscent of the excitement of going to cello lessons. What was I going to learn next? How could I get better? What could I do to break the knot that was hindering my joy of playing?

I learned the organization of the body and the harmony of directed movement. “Hands leading” was the jumpstart for re-learning my cello technique. Inhibition began to creep into my work. I was told repeatedly to “not do,” to release rather than do.

But wait a minute! This is nearly the opposite from the practice scene I have described for becoming a musician. My quest began: How in the world do I reconcile these two ways of learning? How do I incorporate the blissful feeling of an Alexander Technique lesson into the turmoil of practising to perform optimally? How can I apply the Alexander Technique to the stress of playing intimately with others in rehearsals and performances when ideas must be reconciled to present a unified performance? How can I endure the endless hours of cello playing? Although I learned to sit better and to have better use of my body, I could not simply add the general concepts of the Alexander technique to my cello technique. Eventually I learned that the incorporation of the Alexander Technique into playing means doing the process of thinking and directing before the action, as we do in the Alexander Technique to relearn general use. However, instead of words or pictures to prompt action, musical thought—music heard in the inner ear, the aural image—replaces the “thinking”, and the instruction to the hand-arm complex, really the whole body, to play the musical thought is “directing.”

The Beginning of Re-learning

Alexander Technique lessons can be of great importance to the musician since sitting (or standing) is often the first activity to master. The first information any Alexander Technique teacher can impart to the musician is that sitting is an activity that involves the whole body and requires a dynamically lengthening spine as one plays. When I began teaching cello and Alexander lessons in a single lesson, I taught the traditional chair work that I learned with Debbie, Judith Leibowitz, Troop Mathews and others. Then I had my students play in this re-learned sitting. It was time consuming and although I am not minimizing the importance of the multi-layered approach it addresses, I simply didn’t have time to get around to listening to their playing enough—a real frustration for music students and teachers.

As often happens, I stumbled upon a way to teach sitting that is not as time consuming. I discovered it while I was teaching the Alexander Technique ideas to a bunch of squirrelly boys and girls at a Suzuki string camp, called Strings by the Sea in beautiful San Diego, CA. I was giving turns to the children to give each one a hands-on experience of

moving from standing to sitting. Moving from standing to sitting using the hip joints as the primary mover was as unfamiliar to them as it is to many people. They were doing quite well and at least recognized that this way was a different way to sit from their normal way.

However, the next in line was a boy about 10 years old who couldn't get the idea to move this way. No matter what I did, I could not get him to move within his hip joints. I doubt he knew if he even had them. A flash of inspiration came: I asked him if he could squat. Before I could finish the question, this beautiful boy was doing a well-coordinated squat before my eyes, obviously moving in his hip joints. I realized right then and there that moving from standing to sitting is simply doing a partial squat. I asked him to straddle the corner of a bench at a picnic table overlooking the ocean and squat as far as he could until the bench interrupted his full squat. By doing so, he was sitting on the bench in the most beautiful stance that I could imagine. Of course, I tried it myself, and then had the other youngsters do it. The looks on their faces were as if they were saying, "Oh, yeah, that's what you mean!" Thus the squat-sit or "squit" was born.

From then on, I have taught the squit as a means of introducing the Alexander Technique way of sitting to hundreds in workshops and privately. It works quickly and brings about changes we look for in playing, though more practice and refinement will be needed with the assistance of an Alexander teacher over time. It is a natural, understandable and practical way to learn to incorporate dynamic sitting when playing.

> "Rather surprisingly, I began to have instant control over my interpretation"

The beauty of squatting to sit is that almost everyone can do it immediately and can do it without the hands of a teacher guiding. Players usually have noticeable, positive feedback from sitting this way because they immediately sound better. They know they are sitting on their sit bones because they can actually feel them, and they often feel that moving is easier or that their arms feel lighter—all things the Alexander Technique can do for us. The goal-oriented, practising musician now has something to practise and do that will bring the Alexander Technique principles into playing.

Something To Do and Practise

Practising and doing are a deviation from the time-honoured way I was trained in Alexander Technique. Yet, I do practise the squat and the squit. I also practice directions, inhibition and awareness. Just as practice is essential to learning any technique on one's instrument, practice is necessary to master the Alexander Technique. The Alexander Technique is a "practice" in the sense that it's a way of living, as is music, when you take into consideration the time to become accomplished. Now we have the opportunity to meld these two ways of practice. The Alexander student needs to practise movements that are new to him through repetition just as the musician needs to practise, through repetition, passages or scales in order to play reliably. The musician also needs to practise the principles of Alexander Technique: learning directions, inhibitions, non-doing and building awareness when playing.

The insights into fusing the practice into practising occurred within my teacher-training course. My trainer, Troop Mathews, was doing hands-on work with me while I played my cello. Rather surprisingly, I began to have instant control over my interpretation. I was spontaneous and creative in the moment. Prior to this I had to plot or plan my interpretation and then practice it until it felt right. Now I could interpret immediately.

I realized, after reliving this experience, that Alexander directions work for the multi-layered instructions a musician needs to play. Now I am able to play this way all the time. For instance, I can simultaneously direct my right hand to vary the placement, pressure and speed of motion to the bow as well as my left hand to change the pitches accurately. I had to direct my hands, in just the same way that I had learned in Alexander Technique lessons to direct myself to sit differently from my habitual way. However, for playing, the directions were not only for corrections of habit that are usually addressed in an Alexander Technique lesson, but also for creative interpretation. For instance, the printed middle C is actually an internal sound that stimulates a direction to make that sound on the cello and to either play that pitch on the A-string or on the D-string, and sometimes, not so practically, on the G or C-strings. The spontaneous choice I make immediately orders my fingers to play it one place or another. The melody became my directions.

I also infused my practice with inhibition. I took to heart the concept that one has to stop something before doing something differently. Playing is habitual and practice creates habit—although not necessarily perfect, as the saying goes. If we want to change a wrong note, for example, we must first stop before the wrong note in order to replace it with

the correct note. This principle put into action during practice can save a musician many hours of repetition. First, the musician needs to identify the exact note where the passage begins to go wrong, second, stop right before it, third, consciously hear the correction in one's head and then direct oneself to play the correct note. This is "constructive, conscious control" in action.

Although learning directions and inhibition is perhaps the greatest contribution of the Alexander Technique for performers to achieve reliability and artistic expression, an Alexander teacher does not need to be a performing artist in order to help. An Alexander Technique teacher re-educates players to use the whole body when playing, and to restore super-fine coordination through lengthening and freeing the neck and spine. This is essential for the player to reduce unnecessary tension.

From the discussion thus far, we have explored two ways to approach learning. The learning of a musician is direct. It is doing. It is often exploration through repetition until it works, thus building tension. It is gaining security through drilling. The Alexander Technique is learning by removing blockages that prevent optimal movement. We might characterize the musicians' way as adding and the Alexander Technique way as subtracting. This is the dichotomy that must be bridged. We can do this by incorporating one into the other to bring about a new way, one in which both are mutually dependent on each other.

The Squat

I would like to describe the squat and the squat-sit before continuing with the melding of both practices.

A word of caution, squatting to the ground is not recommended if you have problematic knees or hips and your range of movement is limited. However, the squit uses the same principles and is achievable even for the less flexible.

The range of motion for the squat is maximum flexion for the whole body, while standing upright is nearly complete extension. The full range of movement is preferable, but it is not necessary for sitting and standing. Moving in the proper order with direction is important, not the range of motion.

> "I have learned that freedom in playing comes from freedom in all of me"

The sequence for doing the squat begins in standing. To stand, balance on both feet with slightly more weight in the heels. See that you are not being a drill sergeant or that you are not slouching. Be sure to balance your head on the topmost vertebra. For my way of thinking, standing is the foundation of sitting, as I will keep a feeling of standing in my torso as I sit.

Having established balanced standing, begin the movement into the squat by first releasing your neck to free the torso.

Be sure that your arms are comfortable next to your torso and your feet a little wider than hip-width. Next bend your knees a bit, keeping your torso at full length as when standing. Continue to bend your knees while you tilt your torso, with your head moving forward and your sit bones(used in place of ischial tuberosity) moving back as you rotate over the ball and socket joint that is the hip joint. Continue to bend your knees until you have reached your maximum movement with your sit bones pointing toward the floor and your head still balanced on top of the spine.

To return to standing from the squat, begin by sort of turning yourself upside down, head towards the floor and sit bones towards the ceiling, the way a toddler often does it after squatting in the sandbox, and then roll your spine up to standing. Pay attention that your pelvis returns to upright.

A helpful image is to see your pelvis in the shape of a "V." Note that the upper rims of the pelvic bones, the iliac crests, are farther apart than the lower ends, i.e. the sit bones. By visualizing a line from the top and front edge of each pelvic bone to the sitting bones, you can see this "V" shape. When I think of making the "V," my pelvis becomes clearer to me and more manageable. I feel more "up" along my spine, my head goes into balance and my shoulders go "out".

The Squit

To squit, straddle the corner of a chair, or just touch the edge of the seat with the back of your legs so that you are confident that the chair is there. Now squat again using the procedure described above, but let the chair stop you. Keep the feeling of "standing" in your torso when your sit bones are on the chair, although you are technically sitting. Inhibit settling down, or moving toward the back of the chair unless you do not have your sit bones firmly on the chair, however you may adjust your feet for balance.

How To Practise: A Musical Passage and the Squit

For me, practising is a time to be in my musical lab to experiment with possibilities to improve my playing. First, I develop an aural image of what I want to play by hearing a passage in my "inner ear," or "in my head." Then I play it, constantly listening to hear if it matches my aural image, all the while assessing what I need to improve. I only repeat it when I have a focus for the repeat. It might be intonation, rhythm or interpretation. I always mentally state my focus and never repeat just to repeat, unless my focus is for consistency. While playing I have a mental monologue giving instructions and I constantly assess what I actually hear to determine if it matches my aural image.

My process for practising the squit is similar. I see with my "inner eye," or visualize, the movement I want to make and then squat and return to standing, while evaluating how I can improve it. I do it again with a focus. I visualize the changes I want while I stand before moving into the squat. My focus might be any one of the following: standing balanced, or tall; neck free with head balanced; widening the shoulders; placing the feet wider than the hip joints; balancing weight between the heels and balls of the feet; or elongating the spine from the tailbone to the head. Then I move with a focus.

When moving, consider the following assessments:

- Am I moving so that my head and spine have an energetic or literal movement up as my legs move energetically towards the floor?
- Did I bend my knees as the initial movement immediately following the head movement?
- Did I move so that my knees move directly over my toes?
- Did I tilt my torso forward using the hip joint as the place from which I tilt?
- Did I remember to keep my neck free throughout?

When practising an instrument, the beat coordinates the physical movement as well as the musical movement. It is our inner conductor. I find that I can do complex patterns of movement more easily if I put them to a beat—for example, the squat. I use 4/4 as my rhythmic pulse at the speed of 30 beats per minute*. I count: one, two, three, four and keep repeating the sequence. Alternatively, select a faster speed, say 60 mm, and count at least two beats for each segment of the movement described below.

The Squat With a Beat

- On one: inhale
- On two: come to your tallest posture and activate the "V"
- On three: exhale and descend into the squat
- On four: take a moment to let your spine lengthen or stretch in the squat
- On one: inhale
- On two: renew the "V" tilting your head towards the floor and sit bones up towards the ceiling
- On three: roll up to standing
- On four: enjoy your uprightness as you begin your inhalation to repeat

Repeat this sequence several times being sure to have a focus each time, just like when practising an instrument. It is attentive practice that bears results. As I refine the squatting movement, my awareness gets sharper and the subtleties of ineffective use pop out for me to correct.

Warming Up: Practice Routine

To fuse the squat and squit into playing, practise it. Do the squat immediately followed by the squit.

I personally practice this squit just as if it were a musical passage, applying the focus and attention necessary for improvement. Melding repetition with awareness is an important part of this new kind of learning, so I do the squit as many times as I would a passage—well almost. I think the benefits will be obvious when practised consistently for a few weeks and it will become as much a part of warming up as playing scales.

After finishing the squit practice, I take my instrument and begin to play scales or other warm up exercises with this difference: in between each scale or repetition of the scale, I stand, squat and then squit, with the instrument in hand. I like playing scales for only two octaves, proceeding through the keys sequentially, moving to the next scale a half step up from the previous. This way, I cover every note, every string and all sequential fingering patterns and shifts. When I do the whole chromatic sequence of scales, I squat and sit twelve times! Before I know it, energy is flowing, breathing becomes easier and freedom comes into my work.

Performing

When performing, I also begin with the squit and let my hands emerge from this movement. If I have a few moments to rest during a particular work, I return to active sitting by renewing my "V." I have accomplished integrating the Alexander Technique into my playing, and I can renew it at will. I have learned that freedom in playing comes from freedom in all of me: mind, body and soul, not only the parts of my body that are directly involved with the instrument. When I sense freedom missing from a part of my body, I check my thoughts first, then the basic use of my whole self and then the symptoms last.

In daily life, I have a practice of directing my activities through verbal thoughts or images. In musical life I have a practice of directing as well, but with the following distinction; my musical thought, or my aural image, is the directive to move in the patterns that I need to make music. The squit is built into playing the melody as much as my hands are. The integration of the body, mind and soul into playing is now complete.

And so, practise your practice (or hail a cab), and you're on your way to Carnegie Hall!

About the Writer

The first female cellist in the history of the New York Philharmonic, Evangeline was invited by Leonard Bernstein in 1967 and played nearly 8000 concerts around the world in her 40-year career. She completed her Alexander teacher training in 1991, is currently a faculty member of the innovative iClassical Academy and her book *Cello, Bow, and You: Putting It All Together* is published by Oxford University Press.
http://www.evangelinebenedetti.com

* mm=30 or mm=60 means a tempo of the number of beats in the duration of a minute. Therefore, mm=60 means 60 beats a minute or one per second, and mm=30 means that a beat is 2 seconds long. Attributed to Maelzel Metronome, the inventor

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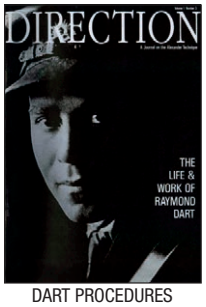

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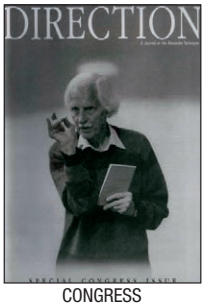

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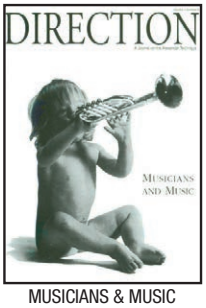

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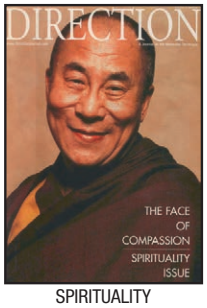

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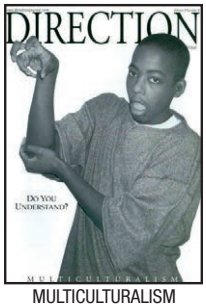

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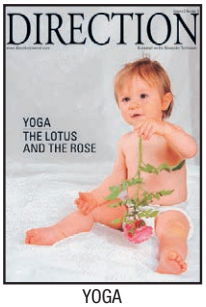

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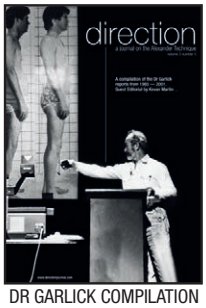

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